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Artist-Run Europe: Practice/Projects/Spaces, Dublin: Pallas Projects, 2016. Sous la dir. de Mark Cullen, Gavin Murphy

M/2, Vevey 1987-1991, Zurich: JRP/Ringier ; Vevey: Musée Jenisch, 2017, (Hapax)

Artist-Run Spaces, des lieux inventés par les artistes pour les artistes, Nice: Villa Arson: La Station: La Strada, 2016, (Supplément *La Strada*, n°261)

- 1 *Artist-run space* or *artist-led space*: artists form a group so that they themselves can manage—run—an exhibition venue, a theatre, a bookshop, archives, and the like. The term replaces other widespread names, such as “alternative” or “independent” spaces, although these do not have exactly the same meaning. Shift of focus: what is involved is emphasizing the fact that we are talking about initiatives coming from artists. But associations of artists are nothing new: the *Kunstvereine* of the Germanic countries, which appeared in the early 19th century, are evidence enough but—and this is a sign of the model’s loss of interest—all we find in Wikipedia is a small page, in German, about this type of association (nothing at all in English or French).
- 2 It is a long time since artists were helped by a charitable institution such as the Artists’ General Benevolent Institution (founded in London in 1814). Nowadays, in the United Kingdom, artists are being encouraged to form groups and manage them themselves, as proposed by the Axis web platform,¹ “An Independent Charity” which provides links for administrative formalities, offers vacant spaces, and helps to create artists’ “profiles”—at times, the administration of creativity has a pataphysical whiff about it!
- 3 This “administration” takes the form of cataloguing, listing places and programmes, coordination and networking, and the organization of encounters, forums, discussions,

and so on. In France, a database on artist-run spaces has been set in motion based on Glassbox,² but not without some confusion because in it can be found art centres which are by no description places run by artists. Such listings of associative art venues, defined turn by turn as alternative or independent, already existed, like the index of New York art organizations that has been around since 1950,³ and the index of independent Swiss spaces.⁴ In forums, symposiums, conventions and online platforms, the subject is up for discussion.⁵ Some meetings take the form of fairs, like the Supermarket Art Fair in Stockholm and the Sluice Biennial Art Fair in London.⁶ Institutions themselves play host to artist-run spaces for exhibitions⁷ (one such being the Villa Arson in Nice, last year) and for festivals.⁸ Anthologies are published with contributions from various people involved in the art world. Let us mention those devoted to the various spaces in southern Sweden,⁹ the Los Angeles art scene,¹⁰ the voluminous *Alternative Histories*¹¹ about the New York scene, and the recent *Artist-run Europe*, initiated in Ireland, which has a comprehensive index at the end.

- 4 The people behind Triangle France, created in 1994, are registering the need to dot the i's and cross the t's after being around for twenty years. They wonder what the difference is between an artist-run space like Triangle in Marseille and an art centre, when both have the same institutional form, share the same public, and have recourse to the same regional and state sources of funding. They want their programmes to be judged by what they have accomplished rather than appraising the particular nature of the institutional model. The ideal artist-run space, as far as they are concerned, is "something where structure and activities form a perfect alternative to the iniquities of the art world: it acts outside the market; it is an alternative to institutions; though public, it is independent of local politics; it sidesteps bureaucracy; it is well removed from high-profile centres; it is not an instrument of gentrification; it helps local artists at the same time as it is part of a more global network; it is happy and desirable, its programme is remarkable and diversified, and it acts outside the pyramidal forms of decision-making... it lives close to the fount of youth".¹²
- 5 For the time when he was its director, up until 1984, AA Bronson, the co-founder in 1974 of Art Metropole in Toronto, experienced "the humiliation of the bureaucrat". Self-management does not somehow miraculously do away with administrative tasks. To respond to a problem, one wavers between two solutions: the first would involve forever calling things into question; the second admits the decidedly ephemeral character of initiatives.
- 6 Over time, as Patrice Joly observes, artist-run spaces have become "instruments for validating and legitimizing the artistic career".¹³ They have had to deal with the problem of attracting ever more powerful personalities. He duly quotes Elena Tzotzi (Signal, Malmö), who observes that "the theme that was used as a practical division between the established and the emergent, the commercial and the alternative, the institution and the artist-run, vanished many moons ago". The ability to juggle with all these models is still there—where relevant move forward in your career in a more or less cynical way. Among self-run initiatives, some have put a special emphasis on the publication and/or compilation of archives. It so happens that it is based on the Zona archives, in Florence, that Maurizio Nannucci and Gabriele Detterer have managed to publish their *Artist-Run Spaces*¹⁴ by using a small list of places which have made history: Art Metropole, Artpool in Budapest, Ecart in Geneva, Franklin Furnace in New York, La Mamelles in San Francisco, Tom Marioni's Moca, Printed Matter, and Western Front in Vancouver. For the various

anniversaries of their creation, many venues publish activity retrospectives, two recent French examples of this being Interface¹⁵ (Dijon) and the Générateur¹⁶ (Gentilly).

- 7 This history is also taken up by museums and universities: this summer, the Jenisch Museum at Vevey held an exhibition about the adventures of M/2, a busy space in that city between 1982 and 1985; Pauline Chevalier's book, *Une Histoire des espaces alternatives à New York : de SoHo au South Bronx (1969-1985)* is a sequel to the thesis that she submitted in Tours in November 2011. This latter extremely interesting work follows the movement in the 1970s of artist-run spaces in New York as they migrated from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, at the mercy of opportunities offered by affordable buildings. Its precise historical context of the sequel did not prevent the author from beginning her study by describing a demonstration that took place in November 2015, when several artists' collectives protested against holding a real estate conference at the Brooklyn Museum. Among those involved with artist-run spaces, some are now aware of the gentrification process contributed to by the fact of occupying abandoned industrial premises. The naivety of good intentions is no longer appropriate.
- 8 Historical studies also show the connection between so-called "independent" spaces and the godsend of grants, as demonstrated in the United States by the brake on their development introduced during the Reagan years, marked by the re-organization of federal programmes, the end of the CETA programme¹⁷ (whereby artists were able to find work), and the budgetary restrictions suffered by the National Endowment for the Arts.
- 9 Several observers are well aware that a certain dialectic is at work: one which upsets the anti-establishment and marginal role of artist-run spaces as an instrument for identifying rising artistic values. This dialectic, which turns the outsider into a moment of the commercial system, has been very well analyzed for jazz by the sociologist Howard Becker.¹⁸
- 10 Social and political criticisms of artist-run spaces are doing away with plenty of illusions. But they are not putting a stop to the positive stance peculiar to these endeavours. Some places have assumed the task of archiving their own history. They have reconfigured the art scene by constructing networks parallel with the predominant art world, that represented by the art market and museums, because the porous nature of the boundaries of the two worlds never culminates in a total absorption of one by the other. In terms of content, they have provided tools for the dissemination of new art forms (The Kitchen, from 1971 on, has been promoting new art forms connected with music, dance, video and performance. Franklin Furnace and Printed Matter, founded in 1976, have contributed to the promotion of the artist's book as an alternative form of expression). Basically, there is the retrospective viewpoint of the analyst, sociologist and the like, observing a process *a posteriori*, and there is also the viewpoint that is situated ahead of the process, where things emerge. This viewpoint cocks a snook at criticism, and deals solely with the creation and the energy invested. Just as the commercial exploitation of the Sex Pistols by Malcolm McLaren did not diminish the group's incredibly explosive arrival on the rock scene,¹⁹ so the inventiveness of artist-run spaces, their power to force their way onto the art scene and their positive nature put them a step or two ahead of their retrieval.

NOTES

1. <<https://www.axisweb.org>>
2. *Artist-run Spaces Database*, initiated by Sabrina Issa with the Glassbox team in Paris, in 2013 : <<http://www.artist-run-spaces.org>>
3. *Art Spaces Archives Project*, founded in 2003 : <<http://www.as-ap.org>>
4. Offoff : union of the independent art spaces in Switzerland : <<http://offoff.ch>>
5. *Les Espaces indépendants* [proceedings of the international symposium of the Association internationale des critiques d'art (AICA), Swiss section (Zurich, December 1997)], Zurich : JRP-Ringier, 1999. Edited by Lionel Bovier & Christophe Cherix
Decentre: concerning artist-run culture/à propos de centres d'artistes, Toronto : YYZBooks, 2008. Ed. by Elaine Chang, Andrea Lalonde, Chris Lloyd, Steve Loft, Jonathan Middleton, Daniel Roy, and Haema Sivanesan (initiated by the OCAD in Toronto)
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Self-Organised, London : Open Editions / Bergen, Hordaland Art Centre, 2013. Ed. by Stine Hebert & Anne Szefer Karlsen
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6. *Supermarket Art Fair*, Stockholm, since 2007. <<http://www.supermarketartfair.com>>
Sluice Art Fair, London, since 2011. <<http://www.sluce.info>>
7. *Dorm*, Siglo (IE), 1 May-4 July 2010.
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8. *No soul for Sale. A Festival of Independents*. New York : Dia Center for the Arts, 2009 (first edition) ; London : Tate Modern, 14-16 May 2010 (second edition).
9. *A Parallel History - The Independent Art Arenas of Skåne 1968-2008*, Malmö : Signal - Center for Contemporary Art, 2009. Ed. by Carl Lindh, Emma Reichert, and Elena Tzotzi
10. *Dispatches and Directions. On Artist-Run Organisation in Los Angeles*, Los Angeles : ART2102, 2010
11. *Alternative Histories: New York Art Spaces, 1960-2010* (24 September-24 November 2012), Cambridge (MA) : The MIT Press, 2012. Ed. by Lauren Rosati and Mary Anne Staniszewski
12. Kopp, Céline. Williams, Alun. "A Brief History of Triangle France", in *Artist-run Europe*, *Op. cit.*
13. Joly, Patrice. "Les chemins de l'émergence 3 : les lieux indépendants", 02, n° 66, summer 2013
14. *Artist-Run Spaces*, Zurich : JRP-Ringier ; Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2012. Ed. by Gabriele Detterer & Maurizio Nannucci
15. *Interface 1995-2015*, Dijon : Interface, 2016
16. *Le Générateur : 10 ans d'art et de performances*, Gentilly : Le Générateur, 2016. Ed. by Eléonore Marie Espargillère and Anne Dreyfus
17. Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, an assistance programme introduced in 1973.
18. Becker, Howard Saul. *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*, London : Free Press of Glencoe, 1963
19. Cf. Marcus, Greil. *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge (MA) : Harvard University Press, 1989.

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Christian Besson is honorary professor of art history, HEAD (Genève). His research focuses on the history and theory of exhibitions. He recently published "Actants et personnages de l'exposition" in *Réalités du commissariat d'exposition* (Paris : Beaux-Arts de Paris éditions, 2015) and organized the exhibitions *Tous les tableaux sont à l'envers* (Dijon : Entrepôt 9 ; Lausanne : Circuit, 2016) and *Anthropologie de la montre* (Nîmes : ESBAN, 2016).